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The Cons and Pros of Being Dead: The Meaning of Life and Language in *Hotel World* by Ali Smith

Once in a while in literature there appear texts which dare to confront the subject of life after death. Interestingly, some of them attempt to fathom the very moment of crossing the thin border between the known and the unknown. Perhaps the most famous modern story about the borderline between life and death is Ambrose Bierce's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890). The story's perplexing time sequence and its surprise ending inspired at least a dozen stories and films in the second half of the 20th century, including such artists as Flann O'Brien, Jorge Luis Borges, David Lynch and Martin Scorsese. It might seem that the human condition immediately after passing away raises more interest and controversies than eternity itself. Undoubtedly, tackling such subjects like life and death puts a writer at an immediate risk of speaking in clichés. Therefore the authors reach for various devices and means of expression to depict the state of consciousness at the moment of the detachment between the material and the immaterial. Texts like this can be viewed in relation to the ancient tradition of tales in which a mortal hero descends into the underworld, to the abode of the dead, and in some cases, like Heracles or Orpheus, he manages to return. In *Pincher Martin*, William Golding reveals at the very end of his novel that the protagonist's struggle for survival was in fact a post mortem narrative (Golding 1956). The ghost of the brutally murdered teenage Susie in *The Lovely Bones* (Seabold 2002) desperately tries to hold on to something material before it is taken to heaven.[1] She brushes against her schoolmate who, endowed with such uncanny experience, develops later the gift of second sight. Susie narrates her tragic story already from heaven, watching her bereaved family struggling to come to terms with the horror.

Ali Smith makes an attempt to convey the most extreme sensations both physical and emotional that are evoked not only in the instant of death but also after death. The unique quality of *Hotel World* is the language Smith uses

[1] See the review of *The Lovely Bones* by Ali Smith in: *The Guardian*, August 17, 2002 at guardian.co.uk.

to render the experience of a tragic death. It is a striking mixture of lyricism and brutality, morbidity and subtlety, black humour and sensuality. Her elegy is based on a variety of linguistic devices which make the protagonists' sensations feel almost tangible for the reader. The language serves also as a means of characterizing the protagonists' identity and their condition at a certain stage of life, or, more precisely, posthumous existence.

Linguistic inventiveness is considered the hallmark of Smith's writing. Her daring verbal experiments, present also in her other novels *Like* (1997) and *The Accidental* (2005) have won her critical acclaim.[2] Referred to as "an acrobat of a writer" (Nunez 2006) and "a wonderful ventriloquist" (Kakutani 2006), Smith is particularly admired for her use of free indirect style in which she renders the surprising variety of her protagonists' voices (Poole 2005, Clark 2005).

In *Hotel World* a young chambermaid Sara dies a tragic death when she, as a joke, squeezes herself into a hotel dumb waiter and inadvertently falls down three floors. While her buried body rests in peace, her restless "rest," an insubstantial trace of her spiritual and mental existence, remains on earth for a few more months, experiencing a variety of self-revelatory emotions. The emotions concern primarily the physicality of life that can be solely rendered through the senses. Unfortunately, immaterial Sara is already partly devoid of them. Although she is still able to see and hear, she desperately longs for the feeling of touch, taste and smell.

> what I want more than anything in the world is to feel a stone rattling about in my shoe as I walk, a small sharp stone, so that it jags into different parts of the sole and hurts just enough to be pleasure, like scratching in itch. Imagine an itch. Imagine a foot, and a pavement beneath it, and a stone, and pressing the stone with my whole weight hard into the skin of the sole [. . .]. (Smith 2002: 3–4)

Such posthumous deliberations reveal the value of the most trivial, unappreciated or even bothersome sensations as the customarily overlooked qualities of human corporality. Indeed, in the relationship between Sara's body and the invisible fading consciousness, there is a certain inferiority of the latter, at least in terms of the knowledge of the external world. While the body is quietly rotting in its grave, Sara's spectre is vainly trying to recall the details about her fall. She must finally resort to her decaying body which appears to be much more knowledgeable, especially when it concerns Sara's falling to death and

[2] She is also the author of three collections of brilliant short stories *Free Love* (1995), *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999) and *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2003) and a reworking of the myth of Ipfis *Girl Meets Boy* (2007).

her falling in love. The body, however, is not willing to share its exclusive knowledge and dreads to be disturbed in its peaceful idleness. It is only due to the spirit's persistence and determination, which includes pulling at the corpse's stitches, that the body finally surrenders and recalls its earthly memories. The argument reads like a variation on Marvell's *A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body* (1972: 103–104). However, while in Marvell's poem the bothersome duality was experienced in the human lifetime, the conflict between Sara's material and immaterial component is transferred to the beyond. The corpse insists:

> Fuck off. Leave me alone. I'm dead, for God's sake. [. . .] I'm tired. Go away. Don't come back we've no business with each other any more. (Smith 2002: 15, 26)

The former unity between the two of them is broken, the physicality and spirituality fall apart and become alienated. The separated body falls into a state of stupor while the immaterial element painfully longs for no longer attainable physical sensations. Interestingly, such posthumously broken harmony resulting in a certain disability of both elements, emphasizes the perfect state of human completeness during lifetime. The spirit's nostalgic reflection "We were a girl [. . .] we had a name and nineteen summers [. . .] it was no one else's name in the world" (Smith 2002: 26) is a real affirmation of the human dualistic condition, traditionally perceived as troublesome and frustrating.

Before disappearing into the next world, Sara's fading existence seems to go through an earthly purgatory, where she realizes the unique quality of life's ordinariness.

> I will miss blue and green. I will miss the shapes of women and men. I will miss the smell of my own feet in summer. I will miss smell. My feet. Summer. Buildings and the way they have windows. (Smith 2002: 7–8)

In her posthumous monologue, she struggles against the gradual loss of words which coincides with her approaching disappearance. It seems the final and the most painful stage of her alienation from the world.

> Seeing birds. Their wings. Their beady . The things they see with. The things we see with, two of them, stuck in a face above the nose . . . In birds they're black and like beads. In people they are small holes surrounded in colour . . . (Smith 2002: 8)

The gaps in the text replace the lost words and reflect the lapses of deteriorating memory. The disappearing words remain in their basic definitions or are evoked through the fixed sets of connotations:

> Lost, I've, the word. The word for. You know. I don't mean a house. I don't mean a room. I mean the way of the . Dead to the . Out of this (Smith 2002: 30)

While such treatment of words creates an effect of estrangement and, consequently, revitalizes the language, Ali Smith aims at something even more daring, namely, rendering the extreme experience of a tragic fall, the experience of a sudden death.

> Wooooooooo–
> hooooooo what a fall what a soar what a plummet what a dash into dark into light what a plunge what a glide thud crash what a drop what a rush what a swoop what a fright what a mad hushed skirl what a smash mush mash-up broke and gashed what a heart in my mouth what an end. (Smith 2002: 3)

The almost ecstatic roller-coaster sensation of moving downwards at dizzying speed, a breathtaking flight whose whooshing sound of cutting through the air is heard in the onomatopoeic "sh" verbs such as "dash," "rush," "hush" is then developed into a factual, almost clinical description[3].

> The ceiling came down, the floor came up to meet me. My back broke; my neck broke, my face broke, my head broke. The cage round my heart broke open and my heart came out. I think it was my heart. It broke out of my chest and it jammed into my mouth. [. . .] For the first time (too late) I knew how my heart tasted. (Smith 2002: 6)

The twofold character of the fatal experience, which hovers between striking intensity and chilly sarcasm, returns in the interior monologues of Sara's younger sister, Clare. Unlike their mother, who plunges into numb despair, or their father, who disposes of every object reminding him of the deceased daughter, Clare experiences extraordinary closeness with her sister. Her monologue is a record of rage, loneliness and helplessness in the face of death. The intensity and urgency of her stream of thoughts reflect her teenage rebellion, and her frequent use of obscene words and sarcasm serves to tame the atrocity she is facing.

> I still just don't get it a dead person & her a dead person & her how the two things are the same thing where does it go where did she how one minute can you be walking about & the next you can't as if like you just got lifted up & disappeared into the

[3] Smith's experiments with sound and punctuation may be linked to her fascination with James Joyce whose ouvre was the subject of her doctoral thesis. See also: M. Denes, "A Babel of Voices" in: *The Guardian*, April 19, 2003 at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,60000,938610,00.html>.

> sky [. . .] God fuck sake one minute there is & the next you are you were just flakes of whatever stuff that you can't even see properly God now all the chest of drawers is mine. (Smith 2002: 211, 192)

The sisterhood, taken earlier for granted, is revived posthumously and reveals its strength. Clare becomes, in a way, an extension of Sara, and, as if in a certain spiritual unity, feels her dead sister's deepest desires:

> I am watching TV for you in case you are missing it I am keeping up with Brookside for you it is seriously crap & not just George Clooney is out of ER but there is a rumour that Carol is going to leave too [. . .] & when I eat a piece of toast it is slowly so I will remember for you what it tastes like & I look at things hard so you will know if you want to what they look like. (Smith 2002: 209)

While the monologue reads like an updating letter from the world, its structure resembles the rhythm of swimming under water. The echoes of Sara's passion for swimming returns in her sister's flow of thoughts. The oppressive density of the monologue, its breathlessness, almost physical tension and determination brings to mind a swimmer who is running short of breath. The gaps in the unpunctuated text feel like the moments of breathing in gulps of air when the thoughts become unbearably suffocating. The chapters narrated by Sara and her sister are complementary also in their titles. Named, respectively, "Past" and "Future in the Past," they allow for a double interpretation. The latter grammatical tense places future at a particular point of the past. Such future is, like in Sara's case, completed, or annihilated since it has already happened. However, future in the past can also be understood positively as the future rooted in the past and drawing from the past. Such future might still lie ahead of Clare, reunited with her deceased sister.

The idea of titling the chapters with the reference to the grammatical tenses is another concept of linking the protagonists' identity with the language they use. The tense defines, often subversively, the protagonists' condition. Elspeth or Else, a beggar asking for money in front of the hotel, whose existence is reduced to the basic needs, communicates in chunks of consonants: "Spr sm chn?" (Smith 2002: 45). She has disposed of vowels like of many other things in her life and uses a mutilated form of language, corresponding with her social status. Else lives, as the title of the chapter announces, in "present historic." Externally mute, she revives the memories from the past, and her internal life appears surprisingly rich. Else's random knowledge, acquired at school and in public libraries, where she occasionally seeks shelter, is quite impressive. For

passers-by she remains, however, invariably, an object of abuse, annoyance or, less frequently, pity. Nobody is inclined to recognize in her somebody (E)lse, somebody, who would escape the stereotypes imposed upon her. Like a language devoid of vowels, Else's identity remains an illegible shorthand for the world. Juxtaposed with Else, a journalist and a hotel guest, Penny suffers from a kind of logorrhea and develops a pathetic habit of making up cheap, sensational stories about herself. Since her job boils down to "fill(ing) up grey space as fast as (she) can" (Smith 2002: 169), her reviews for the style column are padded out with repetitions and clichés. Penny, who hunts for superlative adjectives to advertise dubious standards of the hotel network seems to abuse the language more acutely than uncommunicative Else. Her calculated but superficial treatment of words turns them into a commodity and devalues them[4].

The parallel between the treatment of language and the attitude to life is also drawn in the case of Lise – the bedridden ex-receptionist. Her thinking adjusts to the slow motion of her weakened body which translates into her almost surgical examination of words.

> Lise wasn't well.
> Well: a word that was bottomless, that went down into depths which well people estimated, for fun, by throwing small coins then leaning with their heads over the mouth of the hole [. . .] so they could make a wish. What could well people find to wish for, having everything already? (Smith 2002: 83–84)

The concoction of various meanings of the word *well*, referring to good health, satisfactory condition and a "wishing well" recreates Lise's slow train of thought. Lise ponders upon ambiguity of words and creates new sets of semantic connotations but at the same time she also experiences a monotony of thoughts and the persistent recurrence of jingles or slogans. She becomes language-ridden and slowly loses touch with outside reality. Her world shrinks to the size of her room, her bed, her mind. Her knowledge about the external world becomes irrelevant. Lise struggles against her impossibility of fitting her mental and physical condition into the space of Incapacity for Work Questionnaire. The multiple choice questionnaire proves ridiculously inadequate when it comes to conveying the complexity of her sensations. Yet, the stiffness of bureaucratic language appears to be contagious, and reading and rereading the

[4] Claudia FitzHerbert notes certain Beckettian tones in the dialogues between Else and Penny (see "The Haunters and the Haunted" in *The Spectator*, October 13, 2001). Also Alexandra Yurkovsky points out to a strong influence of Beckett in Sara's monologue (see "Maid's Nostalgic Ghost Makes a Haunting Narrator" in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 3, 2002).

form shapes Lise's memories into a questionnaire-like text, divided into sections and marked with headings. Gradually Lise submerges in the present moment which overshadows her past and which, though burdensome, is also revelatory.

> Would've. Did. Was. Everything – cars, buses, work, shops, people, everything – other than this bed she was lying in was into a different tense now. Now: I am a sick person. I don't do anything. My skin hurts. My face hurts. My head hurts. My arms hurt. (Smith 2002: 88)

Lise's future, however, is still ahead, even if, as the title of the chapter states, it is "future conditional."

The attempt to fit personal experience into a frame of a grammatical tense is not only a way of defining human existence as immersed in language or depicting the protagonists' mental condition. It also points to a unique perception of time by an individual at a particular moment of life. The notion of time, as one of the main preoccupations of *Hotel World*, manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways. A race with time was an integral element of Sara's life as a swimmer, where a split of a second decided about success or failure. Sara's obsessive posthumous preoccupation with how long her accident took, makes the fatal fall read as her final battle against time. Her sister goes to pains to time Sara's speed of falling by throwing different objects into the hole left in the building after the dumb waiter had been removed. This is a curious therapy for Clare, who struggles to transform her sister's senseless death into a meaningful activity. It appears that, in a paradoxical way, Sara was victorious because she fell towards death at a record speed. Consequently, death gains here an affirmative quality as an indispensable element of life. Transitoriness, on the other hand, emerges as creative evolution and, however painful, a source of self-knowledge. Such a positive orientation towards time as a productive rather than a destructive element in experience is relatively rare in literature (Meyerhoff 1960: 67–68). Clare's deliberations about the moment of death day, equally present in human life as the date of birth but simply still unmarked, become an additional contribution to the process of taming death.

Another interesting approach to the issue of time in *Hotel World* is the transformation of an objective time order, associated with clocks and calendars, into subjective relativity. It is Sara's broken watch that takes her to the watch shop where she falls in love with the shop assistant. Since the watch is the only link between the girls, it might be perceived as an instrument for measuring not time but infatuation. A sinister mechanism is thus turned into an intimate memento. Sara's watch, bearing her initials and tickling on a living wrist of

the shop assistant long after Sara's death, becomes the encapsulated extension of her existence, especially that the girl still cherishes the hope of seeing Sara again. Another instance where a clock appears as a device measuring the protagonist's individual experience is the moment of dropping a hotel clock into the empty lift shaft. Clare, who is timing different objects falling down the shaft, throws there also a clock. The clock follows the same route Sara once took and breaks into pieces at the bottom of the shaft. The end of life, the end of time. Interestingly, it seems that also in this case Sara managed to outwit time as it was her, being faster, who led the way, time following in her footsteps. The moment is also a climax for Clare, who feels that through the act of timing Sara's fall she not only executes her sister's last will but also begins to reconcile herself to her passing away.

> listen Sara [. . .] even though you couldn't move couldn't do anything about it listen to me you were fast very fast you were really really fast I know because I went there to see tonight I was there & you were so fast I still can't believe how fast you were less than four seconds just under four & a bit that's all you took I know I counted for you. (Smith 2002: 220–221)

The world as a hotel – the central metaphor of the book – focuses on the very subject of passing through, of transience. It also naturally points to a multiplicity of voices and a variety of perspectives. Hotels "imply more than one story [. . .] several stories happen in them at once [. . .] there is a collision of narratives only walls apart from each other" (Smith *Encompassculture*). And so it happens that the fabric of the narrative is composed of five distinctly different voices which are, nevertheless, interconnected. They allude to one another, overlap and enter into a dialogue[5]. The text reads like a kind of palimpsest. Palimpsestic is also the very nature of the hotel. It stores the flakes of skin and dust of visitors passing through, and collects the left behind random possessions. The hotel used to be a brothel – simply a different form of receiving quests. In future it might become something else, just like the lift shaft which served as a route for the dumb waiter, the grave for Sara and which temporarily is a black gash in the wall, open to new opportunities.

Ali Smith believes that stories ought to be written with the purpose of "mov(ing) us at foundation and remind(ing) us how to live and understand what we experience" (Smith Random House Catalogue online). Consequently,

[5] For a discussion of the treatment of the hotel theme by Ali Smith see G. Foden, "Check in, Drop out" in *The Guardian*, April 14, 2001 at guardian.co.uk and M. Upchurch, "The Ghost in the Minibar" in: *The New York Times*, February 3, 2002.

her treatment of the sensitive subjects of love, life, death and grief is startlingly thrilling. Smith's experimental prose which focuses on the language as part and parcel of the human condition, endeavours to represent the physical and mental state of the protagonists in extreme circumstances of life. In order to imbue the very text with certain physicality, she employs a variety of linguistic devices such as onomatopoeic words, textual gaps reflecting memory slips, or text continuity that conveys a hectic pace of thinking. Her language is highly sensual. She explores the ambiguity of words and creates new semantic connotations which endow her prose with unusual freshness.

The old truth that the real appreciation of life comes with its end, is revitalized by Ali Smith with exhilarating power. Her affirmation of life and her fascination with language may be epitomized in an epitaph:

Remember you must leave. Remember you must live.

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